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Although he pledged no funding for a new Great Lakes restoration plan, President Bush's environment chief and regional leaders -- one of them, Mayor Daley, insisting "This is not a publicity stunt" -- signed off on the \$20 billion blueprint Monday in celebratory fashion. Even environmental groups, which have been bashing Bush for his lack of financial support to protect and clean up the lakes, put an optimistic face on the event.

All agreed that getting federal, state, local and American Indian tribal leaders, in addition to advocacy groups, to approve a plan in just one year was a signal achievement.

And all agreed that the real work -- finding money to implement the 15-year agreement -- is just beginning.

'On the same page'

At the signing ceremony at the Shedd Aquarium, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency head Stephen L. Johnson was at pains to clarify his position. "This was not intended to be a funding discussion," he told reporters.

But he was enthusiastic about the worth of the plan, the work of 1,500 people from various public and private agencies. "It's clear the needs are enormous," Johnson said. "We are very supportive of the final strategy."

Daley, whose leading role was acknowledged by setting the event in Chicago, said, "We've all seen plans before that haven't led to any real action."

This one is different because all the actors are "on the same page," the mayor said. "None of us

are patient. We're still going to fight for resources, whether federal, state or local."

Daley noted that he and governors of the eight Great Lakes states recently asked Bush to support \$300 million in matching funds for new funding of sewer and water improvements, wetlands and river restoration, toxics cleanups and other projects.

'Freshwater playground'

Another signatory and prominent Great Lakes advocate, Rep. Vernon J. Ehlers (R-Mich.), said with a smile, "Let the work begin and let the money start flowing." But he warned that fewer of those dollars will be federal than he had hoped "before three things happened -- Katrina, Rita and Wilma."

Ehlers emphasized that money also must come from state and local governments and private foundations.

Even if Bush's fiscal 2007 budget, due in February, ignores the \$300 million request, "Congress has the responsibility to step in and write that new investment into the mix," said Cameron Davis of the Chicago-based Alliance for the Great Lakes. "The money is there. It's a matter of priorities."

Why should legislators outside the Great Lakes basin care? Because the lakes draw investment and tourists from all over America, Davis said. He pointed to a \$35 billion boating industry and to hunters, anglers and wildlife watchers who spend \$18 billion a year in the region. "It's the freshwater playground of the nation."

Andy Buchsbaum of the National Wildlife Federation called the plan "probably [America's] top jobs program," providing long-term opportunities in recreation and tourism rather than short-lived construction. The Sierra Club's Emily Green spoke of moving the region "from a Rust Belt economy to a Water Belt economy."

'Only two choices'

Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Highland Park), another signatory, said regions with far fewer senators and representatives have won major restoration funding. He pointed to the \$7.8 billion Everglades and \$15 billion Chesapeake Bay restoration programs.

"There is not a Democratic plan for cleaning up the Great Lakes or a Republican plan for cleaning up the Great Lakes," said Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Chicago). "There are only two choices -- action or inaction."